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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: BORDER ISSUES WITH IRAN AS SEEN FROM
SULAIMANIYAH

Classified By: Regional Coordinator Lucy Tamlyn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

¶1. (S) Summary. Local security officials in Sulaimaniyah admit that the province's long and porous border with Iran is under-patrolled and claim that Baghdad does not give them the resources they need to guard it effectively. They consider the main threat to be the Iran-based &Kurdistan Battalions,8 an offshoot of Ansar al-Islam that periodically carries out terrorist attacks in Sulaimaniyah, targeting security forces. Meanwhile, Iranian intelligence is active in Sulaimaniyah, focusing its collection efforts against the USG and local government and party officials that support the USG, as well as against the Iranian opposition in exile. End Summary.

¶2. (C) RRToff met with military, border police, and security officials in Sulaimaniyah to discuss concerns about border protection and Iranian intelligence activities in Sulaimaniyah Governorate. Interlocutors included: General Mustafa Said Qadir, Deputy Commander of PUK Peshmerga Forces; Brigadier General Nabaz Ahmad Kurda, Director of Intelligence and Security, Ministry of Defense, Sulaimaniyah; Brigadier General Ahmad Gharib, Commander of the Third Brigade of the Border Police, Sulaimaniyah; Sheikh Jaafar Sheikh Mustafa, Regional Minister for Peshmerga Affairs; and Brigadier General Hassan Nuri Amin, Director of Sulaimaniyah Asayish (Security).

GAPS AT THE BORDER

¶3. (C) According to General Nabaz, Director of Intelligence and Security for the Ministry of Defense in Sulaimaniyah, the main operational concern for the Baghdad-run Border Police is the lack of adequate manpower to patrol the border. The border between Sulaimaniyah and Iran, approximately 600 km long, is hard, mountainous, difficult-to-patrol terrain.
(Note: U.S. advisers to the Department of Border Enforcement (DBE) informed RRTOffs that at least 38 Kilometers of the Iranian border is too difficult to patrol. End note) Along the entire Iran-Sulaimaniyah border, there is only one major border crossing, at Bashmakh, and a secondary crossing, for trade only, at Parwezkhan. According to General Ahmad, there are more than 1,000 points where one can cross the border, yet only 74 Border Police stations on the Sulaimaniyah side. By contrast, General Ahmad pointed out that Iran has 700 posts along the border (this includes military, intelligence and internal security forces, as well as border police.) Moreover, General Ahmad continued, Iran has dug a ditch four meters wide and four meters deep at strategic points along the border to prevent illegal intrusion from the Kurdistan Region.

¶4. (C) To guard this border, the Border Police has only 3,102 agents organized into four battalions, according to

General Nabaz. He stressed that that the Border Police needs three times this number) three brigades of four battalions each) to do an adequate job of patrolling the border. Besides more agents, he emphasized the need for better technology, particularly in the areas of communications and surveillance, and for vehicles suitable for mountainous terrain.

¶ 15. (S) Setting manpower strength, however, lies not with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), but with the Ministry of the Interior in Baghdad, according to General Ahmad, Commander of the Third Brigade of the Border Police. He said the GOI gives priority to the border in the south, while the Sulaimaniyah-Iran border ranks lower in priority. General Ahmad believes that one reason is that Kurds are absent from the senior ranks of the MOI, where manpower decisions are made. He also suspects malevolent Iranian influence, alleging that Baghdad wants to weaken Kurdish forces, in part to please Iran. As a stopgap, the Border Police are supplemented by local police, and draw some support from the Peshmerga. In addition, the Border Police rely heavily on intelligence, although in the absence of technical means, this is mainly humint, according to General Nabaz.

¶ 16. (C) Comment: General Ahmad wants his men to get paid on time and would like to have more forces, although he might be less well inclined toward an offer from Baghdad to send Iraqi Army units or other Arab-majority forces. There does seem to be a lower level of central government assistance to Border Patrol units in Sulaimaniyah than to other parts of the country. This could be the result of the more general tension between the GOI and KRG over central and regional

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government responsibilities, or simply a dysfunctional bureaucracy that serves those farthest from the capital the worst. End comment.

Terrorism against the KRG

¶ 17. (C) According to General Nabaz, the main terrorist threat comes from the Kurdistan Battalions, an offshoot of Ansar al-Islam. Their principal base is in the Iranian city of Mariwan, and they also have an important base of operations in Sanandaj (Sine). General Nabaz told us that the Battalions' principal goal is to ambush security forces, mainly by means of remote-controlled explosive devices. In 2007, according to General Ahmad, this group carried out nine terrorist attacks inside the Kurdistan Region, including one in Penjwin that killed nine border policemen. He said that there had been four terrorist attacks in 2008. (Note: Different officials give different figures for the numbers of terrorist attacks in the province. End Note.) General Ahmad attributed the decline to a higher level of awareness, better intelligence, and better deployment of forces.

¶ 18. (S) General Hassan, Director of Sulaimaniyah Asayish (Security) informed RRToff that the Asayish (Security) closely monitors the Kurdistan Battalions, and runs sources in Iran to collect intelligence against them. The Asayish has acquired CDs with pictures showing explosions targeting KRG border forces. The Asayish also has movies of members of the Kurdistan Battalions inside Iran, taken in mosques and cafes, and during meetings. General Hassan said that this proves that the Asayish can reach deep into Iran.

Iranian Government Acts against the KRG

¶ 19. (C) Despite extensive cross-border commercial links, the Government of Iran has a hostile attitude toward the Kurdistan Region, according to General Nabaz. The primary reason for this, he said, is that Iran considers the Kurds to be allies of the US. &And really, it is!8 he added

emphatically. He claimed that Iran regards the border between Iran and the KRG differently from the border in the south, and treats Iraqis in the south in a friendlier manner because the area is predominantly Shia.

¶10. (S) Our contacts listed five areas of concern about Iran: support for terrorism, support for smuggling, intelligence activities, assassinations, and the shelling of villages along the border. On the terrorist front, Iranian intelligence supports the Kurdistan Battalions and uses them to put pressure on the KRG, General Nabaz asserted. While much of the smuggling, mostly drugs, that goes on is done by individuals working on their own account, General Hassan said that Iranian intelligence is behind some of it, adding that Iran uses drugs as a weapon against the Kurds. He cited a recent case in which a captured smuggler confessed that he had been paid by Iran to smuggle hashish into Sulaimaniyah.

¶11. (S) With regard to intelligence, General Hassan said that Iran focuses its efforts on collecting against Americans, both their activities and their relations with the Kurds. Iran is particularly keen on identifying who in the KRG and the PUK is helping the USG. Iran also focuses on people who work against the Iranian government, in particular those who support the Iranian opposition, which has members living in exile in Sulaimaniyah. Iran tries to recruit agents inside the government and the PUK. Besides working out of the Iranian consulate in Sulaimaniyah, Iran has another base of operations: the Qaraga office, which handles relations between Iran and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Iran also has agents who work in Iranian companies with offices in Sulaimaniyah.

¶12. (S) General Hassan said that Iran has sent assassins to kill members of the Iranian opposition. In one incident, Iran dispatched an assassin to the town of Koya to kill a political leader who belonged to the opposition Democratic Party. According to him, Iran also recruited a Kurd in Erbil employed by a non-USG American contractor working with the prison system in the KRG. This agent was brought to Iran for training in carrying out assassinations. However, the Asayish was aware of his activity and tracked his movements. The Asayish, moreover, worked closely with the USG in this affair. In another incident, two men turned themselves into the Asayish, General Hassan added. They said that Iran had pressured them to carry out assassinations, but they had resisted the pressure.

¶13. (C) The most serious act of Iranian-directed violence in
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the Kurdistan Region is the shelling of villages along the border. In 2008, according to Sheikh Jaafar (Regional Minister for Peshmerga Affairs), there were over 100 shellings, and hundreds of families were forced to flee their villages along the border. While noting that Iran shells in order to disrupt and retaliate against attacks by PJAK, Sheikh Jaafar claimed that Iran also uses the PJAK as an excuse to shell. He said that the shelling had not hurt the PJAK, only civilians. Moreover, he asserted that the real reason behind the shelling is psychological, with the goal of hurting and intimidating the KRG.

KRG Attitudes toward the PJAK

¶14. (C) General Qadir called the PJAK a headache and said that the PUK Peshmerga strives to prevent them from crossing the border into Iran. They even cooperate with the KDP Peshmerga by exchanging intelligence, although the two forces operate independently. Their goal is to push the PJAK back to where they came from, however, not to capture them. So long as the PJAK stays at their base in Qandil, according to General Qadir, the PUK Peshmerga does not get involved. Peshmerga apprehend armed members if they catch them; unarmed

members they send home. But even stopping them in the first place is not easy, General Qadir noted. The PJAK sends out small patrols from Qandil that sneak through rugged, remote reaches of the Sulaimaniyah Governorate en route to Iran, helping them to elude detection and capture.

¶15. (C) General Qadir believes that solving the problem of the PJAK lies entirely with Turkey. The PKK created the PJAK and even supplies its members, he said. He warned that the problem will not be solved by arms, only through negotiations. However, he continued, the Turks won't agree to negotiate, and they refuse offers from the KRG to participate together in talks with the PKK. General Qadir speculated that the Turkish army does not want to end the problem through negotiations because the war against the PKK is one of the reasons for their power and authority inside Turkey. (Comment: General Qadir's theories aside, we believe the KRG must do more to crack down on PKK and PJAK and make that point repeatedly to senior KRG leaders. End comment.) Sheikh Jaafar agreed that the most effective way to counter the PJAK is through negotiations. He noted that controlling partisans is extraordinarily difficult, as the Peshmerga themselves know only too well. After all, he pointed out, 1.5 million Iraqi soldiers could not eliminate the Peshmerga. It's relatively easy, he said, for regular army forces to do battle with each other; &but fighting partisans is like fighting ghosts.⁸

Comment

¶16. (S) Our contacts in Sulaimaniyah have mixed feelings about Iran. Many Iraqi Kurds lived in exile in Iran. In the 1990s, the PUK received support from Iran during its armed conflict with the KDP. Commercial ties between the Kurdistan Region and Iran are deep and long-standing, and there are extended families with members on both sides of the border. On the other hand, many of our KRG contacts openly express their distrust of Iranian intentions toward the Kurdistan Region, and Kurdish security officials feel that they have their hands full in trying to deal with terrorist attacks and intelligence operations supported by Tehran. End comment.

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